



## For hospitality businesses employing student-workers *Students for Hospitality, Hospitality for Students*

### Summary

Hospitality businesses increasingly rely on student-workers on zero-hour contracts to address staff shortages and to manage fluctuating demand through maintaining a flexible workforce. Businesses in the hospitality sector could, however, reap greater benefit, now and in the future, from student-workers. This can be done by reframing how employers see student-workers and through recognising the distinct needs of this worker group around flexibility, income security and belonging.

The hospitality sector has faced a number of challenges in recent decades in terms of staff shortages, increasing costs of food, drink, equipment, premises, utilities and overheads, delays in supply chains, and much more. These have come in the wake of a number of political and economic shocks, namely the financial crisis of 2008, the UK's departure from the EU, and the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Young workers that may have come into the sector and sought to develop their future careers in hospitality have been hard hit as a result of these disruptions. There is now greater competition for jobs, and universities and colleges have started to place greater focus on employability. Those starting out in life need to know that the hospitality sector wants them and is a good place to grow.

Students studying at university often turn to the hospitality sector to support themselves through their study years. For many, the hospitality sector is a natural choice for its flexibility and because many have had jobs in the sector in earlier teenage years. Hospitality is often where many young people get their first taste of work and, as such, can shape young people's perceptions about the sector and work in general for many years to come. Sadly, there is evidence to show that many student experiences in the hospitality sector are negative which can have, in turn, a productivity impact on businesses operating in the sector. Many students are not reaping the benefits they should from the zero-hour contract, and are not able to access the support they need from employers, their own universities, unions, or industry bodies for a number of reasons. There is thus a pressing need to enhance the culture of student employment in hospitality to benefit all.

This brief reports on research conducted among student-workers working in various jobs within the hospitality sector, and provides practical policy recommendations for employers, managers, and business owners in the industry on how to improve relations with student-workers.

### Main Findings

Increasingly, students have to work throughout their studies, as student loans do not cover their needs and families cannot afford to supplement their loans. Many start working in the sector before beginning university studies and continue beyond graduation while seeking employment in their profession. This means that many students accumulate several years of hospitality experience. Students work to pay for food, rent and utilities and need flexible hours to accommodate their study timetables. They work in the hospitality sector as waiters, waitresses, bar staff, baristas, reception, and event staff, on zero-hour contracts.

*“I would not be able to pay bills and have the money to live... if I didn't have a part time job, I'd be homeless”*

Whilst some students report good experiences in hospitality, many experience job insecurity with zero-hour contracts despite the law providing that holders of such contracts are afforded employment rights and that their allowance of flexible hours should benefit worker and employer mutually. Job insecurity experienced by student-workers, wittingly or unwittingly enabled by employers in the sector, manifests in three areas where change for the better is needed: flexibility, income stability and appreciation.

### A need for greater flexibility

Jobs in hospitality are seen as plentiful and easy to come by, and in principle zero-hour contracts could work very well for students, providing them with income to stay in education and hence support their future career. The flexibility offered by zero-hour contracts in the sector, though, appears not to materialise for many.

*“I got back, and my boss had been like ‘can you work the next two nights?’ - and I was like, ‘I can't, I've got a hand-in’ - and she was like, ‘there's no other staff to cover you.’ In the end, I managed to get one of the night's covered, and massively rushed the essay. It showed because I got a lower mark for it”*

In many cases, flexibility is exercised by the employer and not by both sides of the working partnership. Being called in to work unexpectedly, receiving repeated requests to work more hours than planned, or being told they were not needed at the last minute are often cited as regular occurrences by student-workers – with consequences on their ability to study well and their general wellbeing.

## A need for income stability

Student-workers can feel they are disposable and are afraid their hours will be reduced if they do not agree to any and all changes imposed by their workplace.

*“[if you declined shifts] They’d just start dropping your hours and they’d drop them so low that you literally can’t afford to stay in that job anymore so they wouldn’t like fire you so you have to leave but they would kind of, make it difficult for you to stay ...”*

This also has consequences on their study time and performance in exams, and can lead to high levels of insecurity for student-workers.

## A need for more appreciation

While some students do feel respected by their employers, many report that they are treated with little respect as they are not long-term employees. Perceived as transient workers, they are not rewarded financially or otherwise, excluded from social events, and not afforded training and development opportunities by their managers.

*“I have worked there for two years and went to uni to better my life. I worked there at every single wedding that they had during the summer, and I wasn’t invited to the Christmas do ... if we had had the invitation to know we are appreciated, then it would have been nice”*

In comparison to full-time workers, student-workers also feel their private commitments are not respected and are generally disadvantaged by the transactional nature of their relationship with employers and their transient status.

## Key Policy recommendations

There are 8 employer practice areas where change would make critical difference to student-workers in the sector.

1. Create greater stability of finance. Advance planning of shifts and guaranteed hours will help student-workers know when income is coming in to support their food and bill paying needs.
2. Allow flexibility for the student-worker and employer through participatory rotas of work so that students can select hours of work, swap shifts with others and work less at exam times.
3. Ensure the fundamentals are done right. Give students upon entry to the workplace, meaningful inductions to ensure their confidence in the job.
4. Treat students with fairness by recognising contribution and experience in remuneration and other staff rewards.
5. Create a working environment that is fear-free and safe, with staff equipped and trained in how to deal with difficult situations, so that student-workers do not suffer sexual and other harassment, and other anti-social behaviour, from customers, co-workers, or senior staff.
6. Ensure student-workers have the freedom to make their views heard and their contributions are listened to.
7. Encourage friendships in the workplace. An atmosphere of mutual support, positive social interactions and inclusion in staff events will contribute to staff retention as well as increase the sense of belonging.
8. Recognise that students have a future either within the sector or elsewhere, by providing good in-work development and promotion opportunities to improve in the current job and to prepare for the future.

## The research

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